

## Chapter 21

The plaza had grown busier.

Lunch hour creeping closer, the city slowly releasing its morning grip and letting people spill out into the open space with that comfortable anonymity of a place that had seen everything and therefore paid attention to nothing.

People moved around them in loose currents — office workers with takeaway bags, students with headphones, older couples holding hands, all of them wrapped in their own small worlds while sunlight poured across the paving stones in thick golden bars. Plane trees overhead still dripped occasional silver drops from the earlier rain, the leaves rustling softly in the light breeze. The air carried the mixed scents of fresh bread from a nearby bakery, coffee steam from the cart, and the faint grassy sweetness of the small park border. Puddles on the stones reflected fractured sky and moving silhouettes, turning the whole plaza into a living, shifting mosaic of light and motion.

Mai sat on the bench with one leg crossed gracefully over the other, coffee resting loosely in her hands, the warmth of the cup seeping through her palms. Silver hair caught the sunlight in soft, shifting runic glints that made the strands glow whenever a breeze moved through the trees. Jacket open, collar loose, she looked relaxed in a way she rarely allowed — shoulders eased, posture open, silver-blue eyes warm and emotionally present as they rested on Daniel. The usual sharp analyser edge had softened noticeably; there was genuine curiosity, quiet affection, and that occasional teasing spark in the way she watched him, reading every small shift in his expression with clear fondness rather than cold distance.

Daniel leaned back on the bench beside her, one arm draped casually along the backrest behind her shoulders, watching her with open, unguarded curiosity. The notebook remained safely tucked in his jacket pocket — untouched, but very much present between them like a shared secret.

Daniel spoke first, voice low and carrying that easy, fond warmth.

“So.”

Mai waited, silver hair shifting softly as she tilted her head toward him, her free hand resting lightly on the bench between them — fingers close enough to brush his if either of them moved.

Daniel continued, leaning a little closer so their shoulders touched warmly.

“You turned the experiment around again.”

Mai considered his words for a moment, silver-blue eyes soft and thoughtful, the emotional intelligence clear in the gentle curve at the corner of her mouth.

“No.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow, his arm along the back of the bench brushing lightly against her shoulder.

“No?”

Mai shook her head slightly, silver strands sliding over one shoulder as she turned fully toward him, letting her knee press lightly against his in quiet contact.

“We are now running parallel observations.”

Daniel laughed — low, genuine, the sound warm and easy between them.

“That sounds suspiciously diplomatic.”

Mai’s voice remained calm, but there was real affection threading through it now as she reached over and brushed her fingers lightly along his forearm — a brief, warm touch that lingered.

“It is accurate.”

Daniel took another slow sip of his coffee, then leaned forward slightly, closing the space between them until their arms pressed comfortably together. His free hand found hers on the bench, lacing their fingers loosely, thumb stroking one gentle circle along her skin.

“You know what the problem with that theory is.”

Mai tilted her head, silver hair catching light as she studied him — eyes warm, emotionally open, the teasing spark clear in the small lift of her brow.

“Explain.”

Daniel tapped his jacket pocket where the notebook rested, his thumb still stroking slow circles on the back of her hand.

“I still have the data.”

Mai nodded once, silver hair shifting softly, but she didn’t pull her hand away. Instead she let her thumb trace a matching slow circle on his, the contact warm and steady between them.

“Yes.”

Daniel smiled, leaning even closer so their shoulders rested fully against each other.

“So technically I still have leverage.”

Mai did not react immediately. Instead she set her coffee down carefully on the bench beside her, the movement graceful and deliberate. Daniel noticed the small shift instantly — the way her body turned toward him, the way her silver hair fell forward like a soft curtain as she looked at him.

“Oh.”

Mai turned fully toward him now, silver-blue eyes warm and teasing, emotionally present as she reached up and brushed a stray strand of his hair back from his forehead with gentle fingers.

“You believe the notebook contains leverage.”

Daniel shrugged lightly, but his hand stayed laced with hers, thumb stroking gently.

“Possibly.”

Mai nodded slowly, silver hair glowing in the sunlight, her fingers still resting lightly against his temple for a moment longer before sliding down to rest on his shoulder — warm, steady contact.

“Interesting.”

Daniel tilted his head, studying her face with open affection.

“That sounded like a challenge.”

Mai spoke calmly, but her voice carried clear teasing warmth as she leaned slightly into him, shoulder pressing comfortably against his chest.

“Open it.”

Daniel blinked.

“...what?”

Mai gestured lightly toward his jacket pocket, her hand sliding down to rest on his chest — fingers curling gently into his coat, feeling the steady warmth beneath.

“The notebook.”

Daniel studied her for a long moment, then slowly pulled the notebook out, his free arm sliding around her waist to hold her close in a loose, warm embrace.

“You’re serious.”

Mai nodded, silver-blue eyes sparkling with quiet affection as she stayed comfortably leaned against him.

“Yes.”

Daniel flipped the notebook open, still holding her close, his arm around her waist tightening fractionally in gentle reassurance.

Mai waited patiently, her hand resting warmly on his chest, thumb stroking slow, absent patterns along his coat.

Daniel read the top line quietly, voice low and close to her ear.

“Observation number one: subject enjoys control of narrative.”

Mai nodded, silver hair brushing his cheek.

“Accurate.”

Daniel flipped the page slightly, still holding her close, his thumb stroking gentle circles at her waist.

“Observation number three: subject reacts strongly to unpredictability.”

Mai tilted her head, letting her temple rest lightly against his for a moment — warm contact, silver hair glowing in the sunlight.

“Continue.”

Daniel read the next line, voice softer now.

“Observation number five: subject did not withdraw when boundary was tested.”

Mai's expression remained calm and warm, her fingers tracing gentle patterns on his chest while she leaned comfortably into his embrace.

Daniel looked up at her, eyes searching her face.

"...this feels like a trap."

Mai shook her head slightly, silver strands sliding softly, her body staying warm and relaxed against his.

"No."

Daniel frowned lightly, but his arm stayed securely around her waist.

"You're too relaxed."

Mai answered simply, voice carrying clear affection and teasing warmth as she looked up at him, silver-blue eyes soft and open.

"Because you misinterpreted the data."

Daniel blinked, still holding her close.

"Oh?"

Mai gestured lightly toward the notebook, her free hand brushing his cheek gently before resting on his shoulder again.

"You recorded reactions."

Daniel nodded, thumb still stroking slow circles at her waist.

"Yes."

Mai's voice remained steady, but filled with genuine emotional warmth.

"But not causes."

Daniel stared at her for a long beat, then exhaled a soft laugh.

"...damn."

Mai nodded once, silver hair catching light as she smiled faintly — real, warm, reaching her eyes.

Daniel leaned back against the bench again, but kept his arm around her, pulling her comfortably against his side.

"Well."

He closed the notebook slowly, slipping it back into his pocket while keeping her held close.

"That's embarrassing."

Mai allowed the smallest hint of amusement to show in her expression, her hand resting warmly on his chest as she leaned into him.

“Only slightly.”

Daniel laughed quietly, the sound warm and intimate as he turned toward her, forehead nearly brushing hers.

“You waited for me to realize that.”

“Yes.”

Daniel shook his head, still holding her close, thumb stroking gently along her waist.

“Cold.”

Mai lifted her coffee again, taking a slow sip while staying comfortably nestled against him.

“Efficient.”

Daniel slipped the notebook away, then looked at her with open fondness.

“Alright.”

Mai waited, silver-blue eyes warm on his.

“You win that round.”

Mai tilted her head slightly, silver hair shifting softly as she met his gaze with clear affection.

“It was not a competition.”

Daniel grinned, pulling her gently closer until their bodies aligned warmly on the bench.

“Oh it absolutely was.”

Mai took another sip of coffee, but kept her body leaned comfortably against him, her free hand resting lightly on his thigh — warm, steady contact.

Daniel watched her for a moment, then said quietly, voice fond and close:

“Observation number ten.”

Mai sighed softly, but the sound was warm and amused as she turned toward him, silver hair brushing his shoulder.

“You did not write it down.”

Daniel smiled, his arm tightening gently around her.

“I’m keeping a mental copy now.”

Mai studied him carefully, her fingers tracing gentle patterns on his thigh, silver-blue eyes sparkling with teasing warmth.

“That is unreliable.”

Daniel smiled wider, leaning in until their foreheads touched — gentle, warm contact.

“It’s faster.”

Mai held his gaze, her hand sliding up to rest lightly on his chest again.

“What did you observe.”

Daniel answered immediately, voice low and fond, still holding her close.

“You’re still curious what happens if the experiment keeps escalating.”

Mai held his gaze steadily, silver-blue eyes warm and emotionally open.

“Yes.”

Daniel nodded slowly, thumb stroking gentle circles at her waist.

“Good.”

Mai raised an eyebrow, her fingers curling lightly into his coat.

“Why.”

Daniel smiled, forehead still resting gently against hers, arms warm around her.

“Because I am too.”

Mai studied him for a long moment, silver hair glowing in the sunlight, her body relaxed and warm against his.

Then she reached out, fingers brushing his jaw gently before resting on his shoulder.

Daniel froze for half a second — but Mai simply pulled the notebook from his jacket pocket with careful fingers, her other hand staying warm on his shoulder.

Daniel blinked.

“Well.”

Mai flipped it open, still leaned comfortably against him, silver hair falling forward as she scanned the page.

Daniel leaned closer, his arm sliding fully around her waist again.

“You’re reading the data now.”

Mai nodded, silver-blue eyes focused but warm.

“Yes.”

Daniel watched her expression carefully, his hand stroking slow circles at her lower back.

“Careful,” he said quietly.

“Why.”

Daniel smiled faintly, pulling her closer until their bodies pressed warmly together.

“You might learn something.”

Mai paused on one of the lines, reading silently, then slowly closed the notebook.

Daniel waited.

Mai handed it back to him, her hand brushing his chest once more in a gentle, lingering touch.

Daniel raised an eyebrow.

“That’s it?”

Mai nodded, silver hair shifting softly as she looked at him with clear affection.

“Yes.”

Daniel slipped it back into his pocket again, then pulled her gently into a warm embrace on the bench — arms around her, holding her close without rushing.

“So.”

Mai waited, body relaxed and warm against his.

“What did you learn.”

Mai answered calmly, but her voice carried genuine emotional warmth as she rested her head lightly against his shoulder.

“You are not afraid of escalation.”

Daniel chuckled, holding her securely.

“That was already obvious.”

Mai tilted her head slightly, silver hair brushing his cheek.

“Yes.”

Daniel leaned forward slightly, forehead resting gently against hers again.

“So what’s the next variable.”

Mai studied him for a moment, silver-blue eyes soft and affectionate, then stood up smoothly — but she kept one hand lightly on his shoulder, fingers brushing his neck in a teasing touch.

Daniel looked up at her, voice warm.

“That’s ominous.”

Mai simply said, voice low and teasing:

“Walk.”

Daniel laughed and stood as well, immediately stepping close beside her, his arm sliding around her waist again as they started walking together.

“Well.”

He glanced toward the city street ahead, still holding her warmly.

“This experiment just keeps getting better.”

—

High above the plaza, Mephisto was almost applauding.

“Oh this is beautiful.”

Konrad remained calm.

Below them Mai and Daniel disappeared back into the flow of the city streets, bodies walking comfortably close, Mai leaning slightly into Daniel’s side with quiet warmth.

Mephisto gestured toward the departing pair.

“She read the notebook.”

“Yes.”

Mephisto grinned.

“And she gave it back.”

Konrad nodded.

“Yes.”

Mephisto’s eyes glittered.

“That means the experiment is still active.”

Konrad looked down at the city.

“Yes.”

Mephisto leaned back slightly, clearly enjoying himself now.

“Well then.”

His voice carried quiet amusement.

“Let’s see how far curiosity pushes them.” —

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